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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 007448

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FROM USMISSION UNESCO PARIS

FOR ECA - FARRELL AND IO/UNESCO  
DEPT. PLEASE PASS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION - ROBIN GILCHRIST

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: SCUL KPAO UNESCO  
SUBJECT: UNESCO HIGHER EDUCATION PORTAL MEETING

¶1. Summary. U.S. delegation to the first meeting of the "Steering group of the UNESCO Portal on Recognized Higher Education Institutions - Pilot Project" (Nov. 13-14) played a key role in having the meeting reach consensus on an approach that is consistent with one of the USG's key objectives for the pilot project, i.e., adopting a simple portal model that links to national higher education quality assurance sites, where students and other users can directly access information maintained by national higher education authorities for the purposes of participating in good quality cross-border education. The approach adopted will avoid establishment of a UNESCO-created and managed database of quality assurance information that would be costly, labor intensive, supersede U.S. national educational authorities, and would not reflect the constant innovation and dynamism of higher education in the U.S. and other countries. There is still important work left to do, in terms of refining the design of the portal, agreeing upon its constituent components, clarifying key terminology, assessing country needs for upgrading of national sites, and finalizing the size and forms of country/other stakeholder funding and in-kind contributions to the pilot project. End Summary.

¶2. The U.S. delegation made the first general statement of position on the opening day which laid out preferences, with which most other delegations (including, Australia, Canada, and Norway) readily agreed. That intervention set a positive tone for a day and a half of meetings in which there was a relatively strong convergence of views among most participants, as consensus was gradually reached on (i) the need for simplicity in the portal model adopted; (ii) the need to ensure that UNESCO Member States represented on the Steering Committee would have the lead role in guiding and overseeing the project, with the secretariat serving only a facilitating and coordinating role; (iii) the need to trim down the budget initially proposed by the secretariat to fit a more simplified, less costly portal model; and (iv) the need to allow countries to retain the right to present their quality assurance sites on the portal site

and to develop those sites as they see fit (although it was widely recommended that each country should include some pertinent information explaining their system and specific terminology, to assist foreign users).

¶3. After hearing this round of comments from country participants, UNESCO staff revised the draft budget downward by about 50 per cent to USG 220,000, also based on the U.S. suggestion that capacity-building focus on providing on-site assistance to individual pilot countries, including via informal bilateral partnerships with developing countries, rather than expensive international workshops or headquarters-based staff. On this note, the Nigerian and Jamaican representatives were among the most active, well-informed, and constructive meeting participants, both of whom had special relationships with the U.S. that they seemed to hold dear - one a Fulbright Scholar Alumna and other a graduate of a prestigious Midwestern university. The Nigerian group also included a U.S. citizen consultant who is working with the Nigerian National Universities Commission (whose Director was the delegation leader) on capacity building. U.S. delegation sees value in having the U.S. continue to work closely with those two countries, among others, in the implementation of this pilot portal project. In its opening statement, U.S. delegation offered the Fulbright Senior Specialist program as a source of expertise that could be drawn on by countries in the pilot. Jamaica has already indicated its intention to request a Fulbright specialist.

¶4. A suggestion that each OECD country member of the pilot project committee contribute USD 20,000 was generally regarded as feasible, subject to consultation with capitals. State/ECA rep noted that if any such funding were forthcoming from the U.S., we would require a clear understanding with UNESCO in advance about how our funds would be used. Towards the close of the meeting, the steering committee decided to elect as its chair Australia committee member William Thorn (consistent with the U.S. suggestion that steering committee members rather than UNESCO be the official managers of the project).

The U.S. delegation was able to clarify for the record that UNESCO's 13 per cent administrative surcharge would not apply to in-kind contributions, only to cash contributions. Since the terms of reference contemplated possible use of UNESCO field offices as conduits for providing forms of assistance, U.S. del alerted meeting participants (who were largely non-UNESCO outsiders) to the on-going issue of HQ's need for better oversight of UNESCO field office operations within the framework of UNESCO's "accountable decentralization" program.

¶5. Comment: In general, the atmosphere of the meeting was congenial and productive, which bodes well for the evolution of this project, provided that the UNESCO higher education division chief, Georges Haddad, does not attempt to undermine the consensus approach agreed to and seek to turn the model design back to a UNESCO-created and managed database design. At the close of the meeting, a UNESCO staff member congratulated the U.S. delegation for its "constructive" contributions to the successful outcome of the meeting.

¶6. Action items: The U.S. has been asked to nominate its principal representative to the Steering Committee, and State/ECA believes that should be CHEA president Judith Eaton. Eaton has already been serving on a small committee of education experts advising UNESCO on information aspects of the guidelines project, and she has consistently supported the approach that this pilot project should be a simple portal that links to national sites. CHEA serves as us national authority in this area and can provide strong technical support to the project. USG will continue to participate actively, however, as a Committee member. Mission would need concurrence with this choice.

¶7. Action items continued: Also, UNESCO coordinator Uvalic-Trumbic asked if the U.S. could provide an American intern with strong general skills and reasonably good knowledge of IT (the intern does not have to be in computer field but should have basic comfort level with IT) to her office to help with the project. Ideally this would be from our Fulbright alumni intern pool if mission, IIE and UNESCO agree, but there may be other internship programs that could be considered.

¶8. Other action item: In anticipation of Unesco's revised project

timeline and proposed specifications soon to be circulated to Committee members, ECA will need to respond to Steering Committee's request to countries to indicate their anticipated financial or in-kind contributions to the project by NLT 31 January 2007 (or by December 20 if possible). ECA should also brief CHEA Judith Eaton and seek further information on what support CHEA might provide as an element of an overall us contribution. Mission will exercise sustained vigilance to help ensure that Haddad does not roll back the will of the Steering Committee.

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